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THE OLD NORTHWEST OF THE MIDDLE PERIOD IN AMERICAN HISTORICAL WRITING FROM 1865 TO 1944

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
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CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSIONS

No single general interpretation of the historical writing about the Old Northwest of the Middle Period can hope to present its full meaning. The subject, it is true, is a narrow one. Historical writing is only a small part of the general field of intellectual activity, and the history of historical writing is so small a portion of that subject that, with the further limitations of time and place, it might seem possible to make a convenient summary. But the writing of history is an activity of men, and is as broad and deep as their lives. The interpretation that follows is only one of many possible commentaries.

As the affairs of the Old Northwest were viewed by different historians they appeared in a different light and perspective to every one who sought to understand them. It is, in a way, surprising that there should be as much agreement among historians as the writings have shown. Certain common features recur time and again in written form, suggesting that many persons thought in similar terms, and perhaps with similar feelings and reactions to the evidence they reviewed. Those recurrences constitute the phenomenon of history as a mode of thought about the past, and sustain the assumption that there is such a thing as historical thought.

Trends in the writing of general history of the United States have been indicated, and their bearing on the utilization of evidence from Northwestern affairs. There were continuities between the historical writing of pre-Civil War years and postwar years: the subject matter and the arrangement of evidence were defined and accepted by most historians.[1] But the particular subject matter of histories of the United States concerned with the period 1815-1860 changed after the Civil War occurred. The

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[1] J. Franklin Jameson, The History of Historical Writing in America (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1891), pp. 138-41.

intense experience of the war and consideration of its causes interposed a new subject for the inspection of those who looked backward. Men who picked shreds of evidence from the past to demonstrate continuities or cause and effect quickly fell in with the most voluble and insistent of those who were interested parties, those who represented the Civil War as a righteous crusade on the side of the North against sin in the South, or of the Republican against the Democratic party.[1] Other viewpoints of the Middle Period were neglected.[2]

At the same time, history as the actions of individual men was set aside by most American historians in favor of the view of history as the actions of society.[3] "The unintended growth of institutions and modes of life, the unconscious movements and changes of masses of men," in Jameson's phrase, became the standard material.[4]

A scientific method of writing history was introduced from Europe, concerned with documentation and the application of rational rather than moral, aesthetic, or emotional criticism.[5]

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[1]Charles Ray Wilson, "Hermann Eduard von Holst," Marcus W. Jernegan Essays in American Historiography, ed. by William T. Hutchinson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), pp. 60-83.

[2]Alexander H. Stephens, A Constitutional View of the Late War between the States: Its Causes, Character, Conduct, and Results (2 vols.; Philadelphia: National Publishing Co., 1868-1870). George Lunt, The Origin of the Late War; Traced from the Beginning of the Constitution to the Revolt of the Southern States (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1867). Emerson Davis, The Half Century: or, A History of Changes that Have Taken Place, and Events that Have Transpired, Chiefly in the United States, between 1800 and 1850 (Boston: Tappan & Whittemore, 1851).

[3]Henry Adams, History of the United States (9 vols.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1889-1890), IX, 222-27. James Schouler, History of the United States of America under the Constitution (7 vols.; New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1880-1913), I, v-vii.

[4]Jameson, op. cit.

[5]John Spencer Bassett, "The Present State of Historical Writing," Jean Jules Jusserand, Wilbur Cortez Abbott, Charles W. Colby, and John Spencer Bassett, The Writing of History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), pp. 93-139. Charles A. Beard, "That Noble Dream," American Historical Review, XLI, No. 1 (Oct., 1935), 74-87. Theodore Clarke Smith, "The Writing of American History in America, from 1884 to 1934," ibid., XL, No. 3 (April, 1935), 439-49.

It reached different groups of historians at different times, and with various effects. On one side, it revolutionized historical writing, for example in the work of students of Charles Kendall Adams at the University of Michigan, who began to explore untouched archives and to develop both complexity and order in almost forgotten stories.[1] In another respect, it bound historians closely to those kinds of history that could be written from specifically accredited documents, such as government publications, and determined the direction and scope as well as the quality of much work for many years, until imaginative historians began to look at other evidence of the past.[2] In yet another way, the early exploitation of the scientific method led to rigidities in the interpretation of evidence. Where certain patterns seemed clear in the sources, later generations often followed the paths that were beaten out at an early date without questioning.

The scientific method was closely allied with academic institutions where it was taught and practiced. The amateur historian (the "professional historian" of Jameson's phrase) of the generation of Parkman, Schouler, and Rhodes was replaced by a professorial class.[3] After 1900, most of the significant new developments in historical interpretation came from this class; although historical novelists, antiquarians, archaeologists, architects, and others were also active in exploiting the resources of the Middle Period.[4]

The social sciences, a group of related intellectual disciplines concerned with the affairs of men in society, gained ground in American thought during the entire period after 1865,

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[1]Charles Kendall Adams, "Recent Historical Work in the Colleges and Universities of Europe and America," American Historical Association Annual Report for 1889 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1890), pp. 19-42.

[2]William T. Hutchinson, "John Bach McMaster," Marcus W. Jernegan Essays in American Historiography, ed. by William T. Hutchinson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), pp. 122-43.

[3]Raymond Curtis Miller, "James Ford Rhodes," Marcus W. Jernegan Essays in American Historiography, pp. 171-90. Herbert Baxter Adams, The Study of History in American Colleges and Universities, United States Bureau of Education, Circular of Information No. 2 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1887).

[4]See for example John T. Flanagan, "The Middle Western Historical Novel," Illinois State Historical Society Journal, XXXVII, No. 1 (March, 1944), 7-47.

and had considerable influence in the shaping of historical thought.[1] Frederick Jackson Turner was acknowledged as a "master of social science" and adapted many of its statistical techniques to the study of history.

Writers of general history became more and more interested in the social and cultural aspects of life, and from the days of McMaster, the life of "the people" grew in favor until at length full scale social, cultural, and intellectual histories were being written.[2]

As the affairs of the Old Northwest were represented in the general historical writing of the nation, those features may be taken as indications of what was considered significant. In the early post-Civil War years, the crusade against slavery found a place in general history, especially from the political side, and men like Chase, Giddings, Wade, Douglas, and Lincoln, from the Northwest were mentioned, though not always prominently, in national histories of the Middle Period.

At the same time, and later, the basic political story which the Civil War had temporarily overshadowed but not supplanted determined the main outlines of political narrative. Population, land, transportation and commerce, and public finance were aspects of Northwestern affairs that found mention.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century various factors, perhaps including the "Populist" movement and the unrest in the Middle West converged to sharpen interest in that area and in its past; and at the same time John B. McMaster in Philadelphia and Frederick J. Turner in Madison, Wisconsin, represented the West of the Middle Period as a place where important things had

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[1]L. L. Bernard, "The Social Sciences as Disciplines, United States," Encyclopedia of Social Sciences (15 vols.; New York: Macmillan, 1930-35), I, 324-49. Howard W. Odum (ed.), American Masters of Social Science (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1927). Stuart A. Rice (ed.), Methods in Social Science (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931).

[2]Ellis P. Oberholtzer, "John Bach McMaster--1852-1932," Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, LVII, No. 1 (Jan., 1933), 1-31. Carl Russell Fish, The Rise of the Common Man 1830-1850, Vol. VI of A History of American Life, ed. by Arthur M. Schlesinger and Dixon Ryan Fox (12 vols.; New York: Macmillan, 1927-1944). E. Douglas Branch, The Sentimental Years 1836-1860 (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1934).

happened.[1]

The growth of academic historical studies and in particular those relating to the Northwest provided general historians with new evidence and new interpretations of that section which might have been incorporated in general accounts of the history of the United States; but that seldom took place. Channing referred to some of the material, often coupling contradictory accounts in footnotes; but the picture as a whole did not add up to anything strikingly different from that of his predecessors, as far as the Northwestern role was concerned.

The only general historian who marked any advance beyond McMaster and Turner was Avery O. Craven. Writing of the Middle Period with a view of showing how the Civil War developed from the life of the people rather than taking a backward view and isolating certain narrow chains of events, Craven went beyond his predecessors in depicting a fully rounded and realistic community. Surpassing previous works in the demonstration of social, economic, and moral bases of politics, he introduced a new perspective in the understanding of the Middle Period.[2]

In comparison with the representation of other sections of the country in general national history, the Old Northwest held a minor place. New England, with a much greater sectional self-consciousness, held a larger share in the general story, perhaps because New England historians wrote so much of it. The South, as a section, was also somewhat paradoxically more closely tied into the story of national development than the Northwest. It played the part of one of the two great characters in the central struggle, the Civil War, which constituted the plot of almost

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[1]Avery O. Craven, "Frederick Jackson Turner," Marcus W. Jernegan Essays in American Historiography, pp. 252-70. Carl Lotus Becker, "Some Aspects of the Influence of Social Problems upon the Study and Writing of History," American Journal of Sociology, XVIII, No. 5 (March, 1913), 641-75. William A. Dunning, "A Generation of American Historiography," American Historical Association Annual Report for 1917 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1920), pp. 345-54, especially pp. 350-52. Clarence Walworth Alvord, "Changing Fashions in History," American Mercury, IX (Sept., 1926), 71-76. Arthur C. Millspaugh, "Points of Emphasis in the Teaching of Government in the West," History Teacher's Magazine, VI, No. 2 (Feb., 1915), 40-44.

[2]Avery O. Craven, The Coming of the Civil War (New York: Scribner's, 1942).

every major American history (except Turner and McMaster) dealing with the Middle Period. It could not be eliminated without obliterating the dramatic conflict. The Old Southwest of the Middle Period has had few historians. Like the Old Northwest, it has occupied a minor role. Only in Turner's Rise of the New West and The United States 1830-1850 did attention to the West exceed that given to any other section; and even in those works, while the West dominated the sectional analysis, it held a minor place in the general narrative.[1]

The purposes and aims of general national history, whether they were to tell a dramatic story, depict a colorful tableau, edify and instruct with the example of the past, preach a message, or explain the world of the historian's own day found little room for the affairs of a peripheral and not too populous community.

General local history, which was more specifically concerned with the affairs of the section and period, proceeded on an altogether different basis. There was no question of excluding pertinent materials of the Northwest in order to include evidence from other areas, nor were there doubts of the section or area being central to the story. With only minor qualifications, such as intersectional commerce, finance, population shifts and the like, the local history of the Northwest was written with slight regard for more than local implications.[2]

In the writing of local history, however, the place of

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[1]Frederick Jackson Turner, The Rise of the New West 1819-1829, Vol. XIV of The American Nation: A History, ed. A. B. Hart (28 vols.; New York: Harper & Bros., 1904-1918); The United States 1830-1850 The Nation and Its Sections, ed. Avery O. Craven (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1935).

[2]Clarence E. Carter, "Some Notes on Ohio Historiography," Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly, XXVIII (April, 1919), 176-85. Francis P. Weisenburger, "A Half Century of the Writing of History in Ohio," ibid., XLIV (July, 1935), 326-52. Clarence W. Alvord, "The Study and Writing of History in the Mississippi Valley," Mississippi Valley Historical Association Proceedings for the Years 1907-1908, I (1909), 98-110. Solon Justus Buck, "The Historiography of Illinois Counties," Illinois State Historical Library Collections, IX (1913), 255-76. Ralph H. Plumb, "The Work of Local Historical Societies," Wisconsin Archaeologist, II (Jan., 1913), 65-69. Harlow Lindley, "Indiana History and Archives," Indiana State Library Bulletin, VIII (July-Sept., 1913), 2-3. George N. Fuller, "Historical Work in Michigan," Michigan History Magazine, VII, No. 3-4 (July-Oct., 1923), 232-47.

the historians in the community is a matter of primary importance in appreciating the works they wrote. The pioneers, the academic scholars, the general educated public, the teachers, patriotic and public minded citizens, and many others contributed extensively to the formulation of the historical literature.[1]

Local historical writing took much of its form from the institutions that were instrumental in its production. Local historical societies, with or without public support, were prominent. The growth of libraries and museums had a decided influence in making available quantities of source material, and to some extent in determining thereby the lines and substance of the work of particular writers who were dependent on them.[2]

The colleges and universities of the country at large, and of the Middle West in particular, both as places where scholars worked and as places where a history-reading public was educated, assumed much influence; teacher's associations affected the writing of textbooks and the fundamental public school teaching of American history;[3] and periodical publications, by their size, form, editorial policies, and circulation, were directly related to the emphasis on shorter and more localized forms of

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[1]Solon J. Buck, "Historical Activities in the Old Northwest and Eastern Canada, 1913-1914," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, I (June, 1914), 57-94; "Historical Activities in the Old Northwest and Eastern Canada, 1914-1915," ibid., II (June, 1915), 74-105. Arthur C. Cole, "Historical Activities in the Old Northwest," ibid., III (June, 1916), 50-76; IV (June, 1917), 64-88; V (June, 1918), 51-69; VI (June, 1919), 74-98; VII (Sept., 1920), 127-41). Carl Wittke, "Historical Activities in the Old Northwest 1920-23," Mississippi Valley Historical Association Proceedings, XI, Part I (1924), 32-63.

[2]Gracie Brainerd Krum, "The Burton Historical Collection," Library Journal, XLVIII (March 15, 1923), 277-79. William Warner Bishop, "The Clements Library of American History," ibid., XLVIII (August, 1923), 665-66. D. W. Manchester, "Historical Sketch of the Western Reserve Historical Society," Western Reserve Historical Society Tracts, III, No. 74 (1889), 121-62. C. C. Baldwin, "Notice of Historical and Pioneer Societies in Ohio," ibid., No. 27 (1875), 1-8. Anon., "Works on Indiana History," Indiana Magazine of History, I, No. 1 (First Quarter, 1905), 36-41. Julian P. Boyd, "State and Local Historical Societies," American Historical Review, XL, No. 1 (Oct., 1934), 10-37.

[3]See the "Teachers Section" in the Mississippi Valley Historical Review and numerous teachers' associations publications, especially the Historical Outlook. Bessie L. Pierce, Public Opinion and the Teaching of History in the United States (New York: Knopf, 1926).

historical writing, in contrast to the nationally scaled sets of volumes that prevailed in the northeast and south, at earlier times.

Local historical writing showed an outstanding variety of attitudes. Nostalgia for the past and a degree of romanticization prevailed among many pioneers who set forth the every day life and social conditions of pre-Civil War days. The use of historical examples to buttress arguments in politics or other affairs was common, although it seemed not to be so common across the hiatus of the Civil War period as it was between one postwar decade and another.

There was an interest at some universities in applying the lessons or evidence of history to the solution of current problems, especially those involving government policy;[1] but this interest was almost always concentrated on the recent past, and as the Middle Period was ever more remote, historical writing about it was not greatly affected by that view.

Social science methods however had a striking influence on the writing of local history. Statistical summations were employed more and more frequently, especially where the nature of the source materials made the procedure practicable. Railroad mileages, wheat production, pork exports, population and depopulation, election tallies, acreages of land sold, price levels, and many other matters were explored in this way. Even more outstanding than the methods of social science were its terminology and ideas, both eagerly taken up by historians who felt that historical evidence might be used to correct, amplify, or discover scientific principles, and that historians ought to "keep up with" social scientists.[2]

An attitude toward the past of finding in it an inspirational message was a common one. It was Turner who provided the paramount impulse in this direction by linking the specific inspirational symbols of democracy and nationalism with geographic

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[1]Benjamin F. Shambaugh, "The Iowa School of Research Historians," Mississippi Valley Historical Association Proceedings, IV (1910-11), 152; "Applied History," ibid., II (1908-1909), 137-39. Edward A. Ross, "The Study of the Present as an Aid to the Interpretation of the Past," ibid., II (1908-1909), 128-36.

[2]Harry Elmer Barnes, The New History and the Social Studies (New York: Century Co., 1925).

localism focused on the frontier (which during the Middle Period in his view meant primarily the Old Northwest) and demonstrating the validity of the thesis by using social science techniques.[1] Students of Turner's and many colleagues and their students applied the thesis to the writing of local history, and an exceptionally fine literature was produced.[2]

The sense of personal importance, the vanity of seeing one's name in print was played upon by commercial publishers who made fortunes in issuing collections of biography, to which local history was attached in a standard form, county by county. Examples were available from an earlier period and other sections of the country; their successful application to the Old Northwest led to the creation of a huge quantity of local historical material, all essentially the same in purpose and methods.[3]

The stressing of geographical unities in the writing of local history was partly concomitant with the adoption of geographical limits for the subject, partly connected with a growing local self-consciousness. The political unities of state and county were also geographical; the Turner thesis provided a geographical concept of "the West" as an historic entity. Cultural unities such as class, race, or religion, cutting across geographical lines, were not so greatly emphasized in local historical works, nor were moral unities, whereby men were considered on the basis of good or evil in their conduct;[4] nor even the non-geographi-

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[1]Avery O. Craven, "Frederick Jackson Turner," op. cit. Carl L. Becker, op. cit.

[2]For indications of its scope, see the bibliography in Frederic Logan Paxson, History of the American Frontier 1763-1893 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1924). On its acceptance, see George Wilson Pierson, "American Historians and the Frontier Hypothesis in 1941," Wisconsin Magazine of History, XXVI, No. 1 (Sept., 1942), 36-60, and No. 2 (Dec., 1942), 170-85.

[3]Solon J. Buck, "The Historiography of Illinois Counties," op. cit.

[4]An interesting exception may be noted in local histories of the pioneer spirit in this area and period. J. S. Broadwell, "Mental and Moral Characteristics of the Pioneers," Fire Lands Pioneer, XIII (July, 1878), 52-60. Franklin Sawyer, "The Life of Our Pioneers," ibid., N.S., III (Jan., 1886), 24-26. J. M. Seymour, "Some Compensations of the Pioneer Life and the Perpetual Necessity of the Pioneer Spirit," ibid., N.S., III (Jan., 1886), 54-60.

cal considerations of political party history. Local history was one of the conspicuous features of the historical literature of the Old Northwest.

Histories of the various states were not numerous before the Civil War, but enough so that patterns or formulae had been devised, and these were generally followed until about 1910. Chronicles, analyses of the forms of government and political institutions, statistical data on main economic topics, and romantic and antiquarian interests in fire, murder, marriage, the first flour mill, and the last buffalo were common features. County histories and sectional histories of the West and Northwest during the latter nineteenth century displayed the same elements and interests in varying proportions.[1]

The broadening panorama of history, the interest in the life of the people resulted in modifications of state history to embrace increasing portions of social and cultural evidence, and those elements, as well as economic life, were woven into the main story in closer integrations, along the lines developed by the social scientists.[2]

Simultaneously the scientific method had yielded new masses of information on detailed aspects of early life, and under the inspiration of the message that nineteenth century democracy

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[1]Thomas Ford, History of Illinois (Chicago: Griggs, 1854). Thomas McIntyre Cooley, Michigan: A History of Governments ("American Commonwealths"; Boston: Houghton, 1885). Rufus King, Ohio, First Fruits of the Ordinance of 1787 ("American Commonwealths"; Boston: Houghton, 1888). John Moses, Illinois, Historical and Statistical (2 vols.; Chicago: Fergus, 1889-1893). William Rudolph Smith, History of Wisconsin, Historical, Documentary, and Descriptive (2 vols., being I and III; Madison: State Printing Office, 1854). Jacob Piatt Dunn, Indiana, a Redemption from Slavery ("American Commonwealths"; Boston: Houghton, 1888). Burke Aaron Hinsdale, The Old Northwest, with a View of the Thirteen Colonies as Constituted by the Royal Charters (New York: T. MacCoun, 1888).

[2]Louise Phelps Kellogg, "The Story of Wisconsin 1634-1848," Wisconsin Magazine of History, II, No. 4 (June, 1919), 413-30; III, Nos. 1-4 (Sept., 1919-June, 1920), 30-40, 189-208, 314-26, 397-412. George N. Fuller, Economic and Social Beginnings of Michigan (Lansing: Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford Co., 1916). Logan Esarey, History of Indiana (2 vols.; Vol. I, Indianapolis: W. K. Stewart Co., 1915; Vol. II, Indianapolis: B. F. Bowen & Co., 1918). Clarence Walworth Alvord (ed.), The Centennial History of Illinois (5 vols.; Springfield, Ill.: Illinois Centennial Commission, 1918-1922). Carl Wittke (ed.), The History of the State of Ohio (6 vols.; Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, 1941-42).

and nationalism had been bred in the Middle West historians began during the 1920's to write histories of the West that demonstrated a different feeling for the qualities, intangible values, or flavors, as some called them, of life in that section and period. Paxson, Riegel, Hubbart, Branch, and Clark were outstanding in this phase.[1]

Rather curiously, the old city and county forms of history instead of showing a progressive development, displayed a noticeable rigidity of form and method. Not until 1927 in the case of county histories was there an outstanding alteration, when Joseph Schafer treated the Middle Period incidentally in his study of four Wisconsin counties; and not until 1937 in city history. Then for the first time in urban historiography the new techniques and approaches were developed by B. L. Pierce in a history of Chicago which was a work of unique value in historical literature. In proportion as the "modernization" of those forms had been delayed it was the more emphatic when it was made; but in both instances, and particularly in the History of Chicago, it was not simply a matter of catching up, but of striking out into new fields and exploring new trails hitherto unpursued in even the most advanced works in parallel fields.[2]

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[1]Frederic Logan Paxson, History of the American Frontier 1763-1893 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1924). Robert E. Riegel, America Moves West (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1930). Henry Clyde Hubbart, The Older Middle West 1840-1880 (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1936). Dan Elbert Clark, The West in American History (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1937).

[2]Bessie L. Pierce, A History of Chicago (Vols. I and II; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1937, 1940). Joseph Schafer, Four Wisconsin Counties Prairie and Forest, Vol. II, Wisconsin Domesday Book, General Studies (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1927).